

...Or An Empty Dish?

# Scrambling TV Signals

**Special To The Post**  
 People used to think that the best things in life were free. But, sooner or later, everything has its price: clean water and clean air, for instance. Even television.

Some people learned about all those wonderful cable TV programs spilling out of the sky and figured that all they had to do was buy a powerful new satellite dish antenna for all the programming that the skies had to offer. Neighbors down the street might be paying monthly fees for cable service, but the dish owner would have it all — reception, a bonanza of programming, and no monthly bills. But what about producers out there at the other end of the signal who need cash to provide the programs to fill our dishes?

"Cable operators and programmers rely primarily on the monthly fees paid by consumers to maintain their systems and provide more and better service and programming," explains Kathryn Hilton Creech, President of the Council for Cable Information, a New York-based industry group. "The quality and quantity of programming available on these systems are directly related to revenues derived from these 'subscriber' fees."

With sales of dish antennas running at about 40,000 to 60,000 per month, and one and a half million of them now in use, the problem for the cable industry has been mounting. "Millions of dollars of revenues are lost by cable systems each year," says Creech. "Reasonable estimates put the figure at \$500 million."

So the cable industry has sought a way to "pur up a cash register and a

checkout line," as some executives have stated, through "scrambling" devices. These devices will prevent non-paying viewers from receiving programs if the monthly fees have not been paid for the service. Programs would be scrambled at the source, and an unscrambling device, to provide clear reception of the program, would be supplied to cable subscribers or antenna owners who pay a monthly fee for it. The Cable Communications Policy Act of 1984 authorized cable system operators to scramble cable TV signals. (If signals are not scrambled, they may be lawfully received through non-dish antennas.)

**Scrambling and Decoding—How It Works**

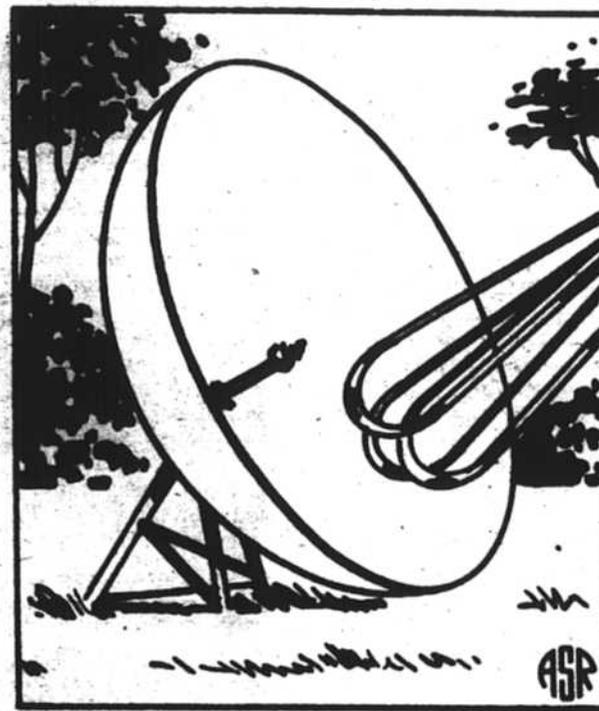
In simple terms, scrambling works by taking apart the TV picture and sound track — through a special code, splintering it into millions of fragments and rearranging them. The rearranged pattern is transmitted to the communications satellite in space. Backyard dish antennas can pick up the coded signal, but viewers will see nothing but squiggly lines and garbled sound. To unscramble the program, they must have a special decoder box, which will be available to regular subscribers and those dish antenna owners who pay a monthly fee for its use.

To avoid the need for many separate coding and decoding systems for all the varied pay services available, efforts are being made within the cable industry to establish a standardized unit. A centralized computerized scrambler system is being sought into which all systems could feed, and

which would require a single decoding device for the cable consumer.

**When and How Much?**  
 Many program services are now testing scrambling devices. HBO, Cinemax, Showtime and Turner Broadcasting are among those poised and ready for a 1986 start. HBO will begin scrambling all programming on January 15, 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Others are following close on their heels in testing and buying scrambling technology. Even broadcast networks are beginning to scramble satellite program "feeds" to their affiliate stations. While some groups of dish owners have requested a moratorium on scrambling for two years, industry experts predict that scrambling will be well under way by the end of 1986.

Costs to dish antenna owners for descrambling the many available cable services, though fair, will vary. "And with everyone paying their fair share," notes Creech, "cable programmers and cable delivery systems can continue to offer the very best in technical capability and superior entertainment and information programming."



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